

## Alfred Bestall's Rupert at War

Stephen Bigger, 2009.

### Introduction.

The Rupert Bear strips in the Daily Express were begun by Mary Tourtel in 1920 until poor health caused her to withdraw in 1936. Alfred Bestall was commissioned to take them over in 1936, after a varied career as illustrator in various books and magazines. Rupert became his life's work up to 1973 when a disagreement with the newspaper, over altering his 1973 Annual artwork (making it the only "white faced Rupert" Annual cover), brought about his resignation which caused five years of great uncertainty. Mostly, the stories in the Annuals first appear in newspaper strips, which were coloured for the Annual, but some stories were specially written for Annuals. Where this is significant, I indicate it in the analysis which follows. This article discusses the strips and stories presented during war years, and especially 1939-1945 although there is one significant cold war addition. Although there are of course few direct references to war conditions, the anxieties surrounding fighting, bombing, and invasion fears affects creative thoughts even in these 'simple' stories for young children. Actually, Bestall stories are never simple. Rupert's imagined adventures have to be taken as true as Rupert himself takes them, and as children tend to think of their own adventures. Mrs Bear delightfully welcomes him back for tea with 'Have you had a nice day dear", when yes he has, delivering the world from mass destruction, monsters, crooks, tree sprites, imps and the like. And yes please to more jam.

### 1939-1941.

By September 1939, Alfred Bestall had developed his personal style in the Daily Express Rupert strips and maintained the tradition of Christmas annuals, entitled Adventures, New Adventures or More Adventures of Rupert. The following were collected in the 1941 Annual. As war broke out, *Rupert and the Sea Serpent* was half way through, ending 6th October. Of course in the pre-war post Munich world Britain was aware that it was on the edge of chaos, which the sea serpent represents, and there is a hope that chaos will be friendly in the end. Many writers express deep anxieties in this immediately pre-war period, from Nevil Shute's vivid description of a bombed city, in *Whatever Happened to the Corbetts?* (1939), or Percy Westerman's *Secret Flight* (1939) in which the (hopelessly optimistic) demonstration of superior technology persuades the Axis powers to stop their belligerence. The following, *Rupert and the Mystery Pond* was the first strip to be completed in wartime though we don't know when it was started. In the story, Rupert meets a mysterious stranger, who remains mysterious to the end. All we know is that he was an explorer looking for Nutwood Lake. He is injured, and Rupert completes the mission, meeting in the depths of the earth an ancient and huge toad who tells him what to do. Going through potholes and tunnels is a common theme in Bestall's Rupert stories, standing for the journey into the imagination to find wisdom and insight. The toad stands for tradition and continuity, and the whirlpool Rupert dives into to reach the surface shows that at the end of peril lies comfort and safety, or expressed the other way round, one has to risk peril to achieve peace and security. The fantasy elements in any story have an underlying psychology, visualising and representing social

phenomena. I attempt explanations throughout this paper, but there is no fixed almanac of meanings – readers are encouraged to work things out and perhaps disagree. The toad is deep down in the earth through a tunnel – deep in the subconscious or unconscious. It is ancient, hence tradition, continuity, the status quo. It is huge, the enormous body of tacit knowledge. It distils this into wisdom, providing strength and common sense. Rupert obeys, and it does not fail him; despite the danger and fear he survives and returns to the surface. The period around the start of the war was a time to keep one's nerve. 'Common' sense is uncommon, but important. Avoidance of panic was essential. In that great reservoir of English tradition lay the answers. Listen to it, listen to the toad.

Probably, *Rupert and the Little Woodman* was perhaps the first story wholly conceived in war, beginning 14th November. This is a story of shirkers. Porky makes every excuse not to cooperate in collective action, and is greedy, consuming rather than sharing. Porky wants to know if we can have things without working for them, and so continue his idle life. This was a time of shortage, rationing, and spivs, then the rich were able to eat in unrationed restaurants. Porky is dressed as the squire, in posh attire, plus fours and waistcoat. The chums are directed to the little woodman who has a shop in the forest and is responsible for all forest magic (he is mixing colours for flowers as we meet him). He gives Porky ice cream plants which, we know later, are intended to punish him and bring him to his senses by making him ill. The seeds immediately germinate and produce ice creams next day. Porky gobbles his, and is ill. Rupert offered his to his mother (and thereby is generous) who eats it and is also ill. The lesson is that one person's greed has consequences on others. Rupert fetches the antidote to the poison (the antidote to greed is generosity, which he has also administered), mother is cured, and Porky repents. Selfishness will not win the war. Even Porkies, the proverbial greedy pigs, can reform. Take a thought also for forest magic. The bounty of the hedgerow and forest is magnificent and not to be taken for granted. Beauty and fruitfulness is magic in a way – but not everything is good to eat. Nature, the creator, plays jokes sometimes. It pays to be sure about what one decides to eat.

*Rupert and the Forest Fire* began in the new year (22 January, 1940) after a Christmas offering. This is dark in two ways. The world (Nutwood) is on fire and all the animals are panicking. But it is all smoke and no fire (a good description of the phoney war) and the smoke is located as coming from an underground inventor's workshop. The panic is caused by new technology. The inventor has made a car which runs on a coiled spring (no oil, which is in short supply) but wishes to keep the secret *for himself* (so is a war profiteer) and imprisons Rupert. Rupert escaped but is recaptured and taken on the test run (the inventor, dressed in army uniform, almost Heil Hitlers with arm raised in one scene, showing how selfishness serves the enemy). The coiled spring comes loose, Rupert is thrown into a tree by it, the car sinks into a bog, and the inventor clears out secretly with empty hands. It pays therefore to watch out for crooks and fifth columnists, our own people who sabotage the war effort and play the Nazi's game for them. Such selfishness plays only into enemy hands.

*Rupert and the Red Egg* (from 23rd February 1940) introduces readers to the 'Master's' new aeroplane, a helicopter or more probably an autogyro, that is a plane with forward propulsion with free-rotating rotor blades for upward lift. A red egg is found and taken

to China (by Rupert and Ping Pong, carried by the Messenger Bird) for explanation, where it hatches out to become a baby dragon, which endangers the Chinese emperor also. It constitutes a real danger in human society and needs to be taken back to the land of dragons, which the bird carries out. The plane arrives to take the chums home. The story shows that a great destructive force has been born, and has to be put back in its place, nipped in the bud before it becomes indestructible. Flight and the aeroplane will be a crucial tool in achieving this. What does the dragon represent? Traditionally chaos, the eternity from which everything comes and to which everything goes. The Vikings pictured the dragon eating its tail, everlastingly. Ancient creation stories derive being from chaos and a chaos dragon. It is disorder, hostility, destruction. Its place is not here and it must be removed from here, by force if necessary.

I held over the Christmas story of December 1939-January 1940 (as this was reprinted in the 1942 Annual) *Rupert and the Wrong Presents* (22 December to 20th January). Rupert wrote to Santa asking for a motor boat and received a pair of boots with wings. His father received a flute instead of a pipe. Thus begins a cunning tale. Wearing the boots, he found himself flying. The flute summons a wooden bird. The bird is so alarmed at the wrong presents being in the public domain (flight and secret signals) that Rupert is brought to Santa's castle (representing the prime minister), helped by a toy hurricane plane. The open distribution of top secret ordnance has alarmed the Christmas authorities, and Rupert is clearly doing a service to national security. (The flying shoes would have been much more fun than a boat). A golly (no longer a gollywog in the reproduction edition, just golly+ white space) is the doorboy, and Santa's 'secretary', looks like a bureaucrat or politician with a dolly-bird typist. Rupert is sent with a covering letter to Santa who explains, "You see, Rupert, ...I had heaps of extra work to do last Christmas, because lots of children were spending Christmas in other people's homes, and I had a job to find them at all". The evacuees in 1939. He is given the right presents and is taken home by plane. National secrets are restored and Rupert has acted as a model citizen.

A story from 1940 centres on a scarecrow, Omedod (6th April to 22nd May 1940) who can speak and walk around, as all British children know. He scares birds by day, and is off duty at night, so goes to play with Rupert. Rupert loses Algy when they run from a farmer, who thinks they are damaging his fruit-trees. Rupert meets the local plod, Constable Growler who is on the watch for spies. They are close to the sea. Rupert searches for Algy and comes across Omedod. They shelter in a hayloft when two suspicious men come in with a lantern speaking a foreign language. A good clue. Rupert follows, and hides behind a water butt. Omedod gets trapped in the loft when the ladder is taken, so Rupert has to take his place as duty scarecrow. Algy rescues him and takes him back to the barn where the two spies come out of a trapdoor and kidnap Rupert and Algy. They go through the tunnel, prisoners, which comes out in a cliffside and the spies flash a torch towards a waiting boat. The chums are rescued in the nick of time by Omedod, who scares the spies who take him for a ghost. They report back to Constable Growler, who goes with the farmer to find the trapdoor and the cliffside tunnel. All ends happily, the spies apprehended, Omedod back on duty, the farmer allowing Rupert to pick bluebells for mother (it is Eastertime) and Rupert promises not to damage the fruit-trees. Catching spies and picking flowers is a recipe for a very enjoyable day.

*Rupert and the Cartwheels* (23 May to 22nd June 1940) is more puzzling in its putative war connections. True they meet a friendly armed guard, and restore a castle to its aristocratic owners by finding lost treasure (Edward Trunk's cartwheel plunged him into a hole with a rotten cover). One picture looks like everyone giving a Nazi salute, as a prelude to failed cartwheels (the failure of Nazism to overturn the world order?), cartwheels which are replaced by a cunning diversion through a fence where Rupert and Algy almost failed, Edward Trunk did fail and had to invent a brilliant new strategy (war requires adaptability). Their journey to that point had been through water first, to a defended citadel in need of treasure, which they duly found to save the day. The evacuation from Dunkirk began on 24th May until 4th June, just as the strip was beginning. Given that Bestall may have been submitting his copy gradually, his simple follow my leader story planned when, to be sure, the British army were in dire straights, was able to provide some solace to readers. At the same time as the army were being ferried across the channel, Rupert and his chums were rescued from the water and managed to solve the problem. So too Britain would hold out, and find the strength to succeed. It was home, the Englishman's castle; and in was valuable, a real treasure. Only the sharp-eyed might notice that the Britain being defended was class-riven, full of walled castles (however decrepit) and treasure (inherited wealth).

*Rupert and the Little Plane* (12.4.1941-19.5.1941) is an optimistic tale of a plane that runs without petrol. Fuel was rationed, and the convoys were struggling. The little plane was a mixture of autogyro and hand-cranked geared propeller. When Rupert was tired of cranking, the autogyro brought them plane gradually down. Two spies (the fox brothers) try to steal it, but are foiled as Rupert has kept the winding handle. A simple tale with a simple message: these are serious times. Be prepared for effort, and for trouble, and immobilise your vehicles.

The 1942 annual also contained three pre-war stories. The last one, *Rupert at Sandy Bay*, looked back to the good times of seaside holidays, before beaches were filled with mines and barbed wire.

The next stories in 1940 were carried in the 1943 Annual. *Rupert and Tiger Lily*, 24 June to 3 August) is our first introduction to this Chinese magician's daughter. She posed problems in showing too much of her magic ability in school. This exuberance was clearly inappropriate and she soon manages to show much less character. She is however a very clever girl who learns the important (ironic) message that schools are about *working* and *not for thinking*. The Rupert strips are generally about thinking and not working. The emphasis on the Chinese conjuror is timely, and we will see crucial war connections later. He represents genius, the wonderful in technology, the things ordinary people cannot even dream of. The development of the computer at Bletchley Park, and radar in Malvern were real life examples. Stories about the conjuror normally mix inspiration with perspiration – the magic idea has to be worked on responsibly and to an extent, this is what Tiger Lily's schooling represents.

Rupert and the Banjo, 6.8.1940 - 21.9.40 is the August seaside holiday Sandy Bay offering, notwithstanding that no child was allowed near a seaside this year. The war doesn't intrude: it is a story of helping others and overcoming two rough pirates who

stole the banjo threatening the fairground folk to lose their livelihood. Those other 'pirates' lording in on the continent were certainly depriving many people of lives and livelihoods by invasion and attacking the convoys, but this is only a distant echo.

Rupert's Good Turn, 24.9.1940 - 1.11.1940 is about forgiveness and solidarity. A farmer is annoyed with the chums for trespassing; and Rupert is annoyed with the fox brothers for playing a trick; but they save the farmer's haystack from fire, and negotiate the release of the foxes. Annoyances are shelved in the face of the greater danger, fire. Outside of the strip, the Blitz was under way, and the Battle of Britain was on. This 'Fire' must be tacked, and allies must be friends and not foes. Good turns on all sides are part of recipe for winning the war.

In *Rupert and the Piper*, 2.11.1940 - 16.12.1940, Rupert finds a pipe in his Nutwood 'lumber-room' and shortly afterwards is given The Pied Piper to read. He falls asleep (the readers don't yet know) and with his chums meets the real Pied Piper who draws them all to become prisoners in his castle. Rupert alone resists to pull of the music, and sets off to rescue them, against the advice of the red squirrel. He meets a friendly giant who devises a form of rescue - he throws Rupert overarm, with a parachute to break his fall. The parachute fails ..., but Rupert wakes up in the nick of time. The Battle of Britain was technically over at the time this serial began, but was taking place when the story was conceived. The chums would be rescued from Hamelin Castle (suitably Germanic) by air power, supported by allies (animals, birds and a giant). By the end of the strip, the danger was over (Rupert woke up) and the child reader could sleep peacefully. Rupert becomes a role model for resistance: never despair, never go with the crowd, never panic, be agents for change, resistance workers. Have a go, or as Churchill said at the time, 'Go To It'.

For *Rupert's Birthday*, 6.1.1941 - 15.2.1941, Rupert wants to grow up, but inflating in size proves a painful experience – a lovely play on words. The child readers in wartime were growing up very quickly, and were shown here how it was better to stay young and little and not rush into adult responsibility.

In *Rupert and the Iron Key*, 17.2.1941 - 10.4.1941 - thieves (an outsider and an insider, (a spy and a fifth columnist?) try to rob a castle, but Rupert foils their plan and finds the treasure, a gold suit of armour (the invaders are repulsed, as they were on 17 September 1940, the Battle of Britain and end of the invasion threat, and Britain is refinanced, armed and defended).

In *Rupert and the Black Moth*, 20.5.1941-11.6.1941, Father Bear is digging for victory but a tame black moth eats his cabbages. On advice from the Chinese Conjurer, Rupert takes the moth back to the Yellow Mountains. This is achieved through a cave system (that is, deep in the imagination) and Rupert is given the reward he asks for, a replacement for the cabbages. There are some negative stereotypes of Chinese and a black man (but it is an Ali Baba reference) but the tale demonstrates that if everyone honours the rules of ownership, then there will be food for all. In other stories also there is a humanistic moral. In *Rupert and the Circus Dog*, 12.7.1941 - 15.8.1941, the ringmaster is a bully, kidnaps a valuable new performing monkey, and with Rupert's help is sacked. The message is that kindness gets the most out of people. In *Rupert's*

*Big Game Hunt*, 16.8.1941 - 10.10.1941, a whirlwind destroys a circus, and Rupert rounds up the animals. The moral is: do not panic in a face of disaster but sort things out. *Rupert's River Adventure*, 11.10.1941 - 14.11. 1941 is that Willie and Rastus, the mice, are kidnapped on a boat trip, imprisoned in a castle tower on an island, and are released by Rupert and Podgy in a 'great escape'. *Rupert and Golly*, 15.11.1941 - 5.1.1942 is about dealing with punishment. A golly from Santa's workshop tries to punish Rupert and Bill Badger by making them help with the toys (mostly painting fighter planes). They really enjoy this, and the bureaucratic golly is very cross. Santa is amused at the come-uppance of the bureaucrat. Apart from the anti-bureaucracy dig, there is a message that punishment can become enjoyment, and we can deal with punishment by refusing to feel punished.

### 1942- 1945.

The 1944 annual, *Rupert in More Adventures*, incorporated strips from the *Daily Express* in 1942 and early 1943, with two specially written stories. In *Rupert and Rollo*, Rupert and Edward Trunk go on holiday with the gypsy family (his mother "looks doubtful at first"! ). We meet the indomitable "the gypsy grannie", always in lower case (she achieves capitals by 1943, in the 1945 annual). They come to the seaside, and meet a coastguard who begs their help (that is, expects children to be vigilant in war and report anything suspicious). There are some very bad men – spies. They are seen, then they disappear. Rollo has an adult head on his shoulders. "We gypsies know more than most people", he says to Rupert as the chums get ready for sleep. Gypsies, he means, know the land and observe things carefully. He thinks he knows the answer, but "it will be too dangerous for little bears". This job is too dangerous for children. So Rollo cuts Rupert out next morning and sets off by himself. Rupert is a little concerned. "Rollo, he's wise for his age", the gypsy grannie tells Rupert. He wants to protect the little ones and be a man. Rupert finds the secret path down to the beach through the rocks. As Rupert watches, the spies catch Rollo and bring him to their boat just as Rupert is exploring it, so he hides under an old sail on the boat. The three spies take Rollo and question him, but he says nothing. They land on an island and go through a tunnel to a secret base. There Rupert releases Rollo, locks the men into their room, and takes the boat towards land. Little ones can have their uses. The story is not quite over: one of the men swims after them. You will need to read the story for yourself if you want to know what happens, as it doesn't add to the war theme. The protective Rollo (young adult) is thus rescued by the bear (child) he was trying to protect. War involves *everyone* cooperating. It is inclusive. No one is too young or too small to be excluded.

*Rupert and the Old Map*, still on the holiday with Rollo, introduces us to a foreigner who speaks a foreign language, and loses an earring which is inscribed in a foreign language that the gypsy grannie cannot recognize. I think readers have got the point by now. He is not called a spy, and there is no mention of war, but: the foreigner, and his boss, the pirate captain are invading by sea (the boat is hidden out of sight) to steal the rightful property of the Englishman Sailor Sam (a treasure map). The pirate is mighty and strong and is all set to kill Rupert. The strip may be for little children (?) but it is not soft. Because of Rupert's good deed, the foreigner returns the favour and pleads for Rupert's life against the Captain. Fortunately, the reader knows, Rupert had disobediently removed the map from the chest and hidden it somewhere else, so the pirate only steals

the empty chest. Disobedience can be defensible. In 1942 another pirate leader was trying to steal treasure from Britain and threatening invasion. He was also to be stoutly repulsed or tricked. Good turns done to foreigners (such as Poles, French, Belgians) might win them to our side even when they outwardly work for the enemy. Rupert's escape involves secret messages (carried by a seagull, representing intelligence), an escape by water from a tight (port)hole (Dunkirk) and a small boat bringing him to shore (the small boat armada). Britain's treasure (the empire?) has been saved just in time, and by happenstance (Rupert disobediently but wisely hiding the map in a hollow tree). God, fortune or fate is on his side.

*Rupert and the Tiny Flute* emphasises that we interfere with nature at our peril. We need the crops to grow, and cannot assume that they will always be there. In 1942, rationing caused by convoy casualties to U-boats was at its height. In this story this is symbolised by the failure of the crops to grow in spring. 1942 was a time when landgirls and PoWs together tried to feed the nation, who were themselves encouraged to dig for victory and grow their own. In this story, the crop shortage was caused by Rupert finding a tiny flute belonging to the imps of spring who caused germination. Lack of wisdom and concern caused a germination crisis. Crumbling buildings were one symptom of the wrong use of the flute. The breaking farm fences symbolises crisis in farming. The crumbling of the mineshaft suggests a crisis in energy supply. The restoration of the flute to the imps, from deep destruction (Podgy throwing the flute out of a crumbling mine) re-energises the land's fecundity and restores the crops. So, a sharp focus on the environment and food supply restores hope out of destruction.

*Rupert and the Mystery Voice* comes from the period of radar and communications technology. The Telecommunications Research Establishment (TRE, Malvern) plotted and planned new ideas with radio-communications and beams and such like. This story had a boffin, the Professor, who produced a voice projection (ventriloquism) machine. Like radar, it sends out radio waves, not just receives them. It played havoc by throwing the voice into trees, barns etc: but the serious side was to keep it out of the thieving hands of a cruel-looking poacher who takes both machine and bear. Confused by various voices being thrown, including his own, he enables Rupert to escape with the machine and lure the poacher into the handcuffs of PC Growler. Though he is not foreign, inventions have to be protected from opportunist crooks.

*Rupert and the Yellow Cloak* brings us face to face with another foreigner who steals a national treasure, some rare herbs collected by the renowned Septimus Goat. This is a short story, only 28 frames written just for the Annual. The cloak serves also as a tent, and in the end as a net to catch the thief, a symbol of recycling and reuse. The thief steals the rare herbs (black market medicine, perhaps) and is motivated by money (they catch him by putting some coins on the ground for him to 'find'). It is a simple tale of a thief and black-marketeer being apprehended.

The remainder of the stories have morals indirectly relevant to a war setting. *Rupert and Snuffy* (another new story) features a naughty puppy with the message that affection is more effective than punishment. In *Rupert and the Granny Goat*, Rupert gives her flying pills by mistake, so she ends up a tree. Only by administering a second dose can they get her home. Allegorically, success can only be achieved by becoming confident in the

air, a lesson of the war. *Rupert's Rainy Adventure* finds Rupert babysitting Pompey Trunk when the weir gives way and the house floods. By taking charge of the situation, Rupert saves baby Pompey's life, just as many children had been called on to do in times of blitz and bombings. The breeches buoy/zip line is a wonder to behold. *Rupert's Strange Party* was at the home of Tigerlily and the Chinese conjuror. Warned not to touch the conjuror's magic things, which are locked away in his study, Rupert finds himself inadvertently by a secret route in the study and he magics the whole house with the people in it into a far off forest. The conjuror is quite tolerant in the circumstances and uses his wand to magic the house back again, but unfortunately one chum, Lily Duckling remains lost in the far off forest. Magic in these stories stands for advanced technology. Many things that go wrong can be solved by it; however, it has its limits. The wand breaks, and Lily cannot be magiced back. Rupert has to rectify matters with the wishing chair: where technology fails, hope and imagination are needed to work out solutions. Finally, *Rupert and the Dutch Doll* is the Christmas offering. The Dutch doll runs off in protest at the prospect of being dragged down the chimney. Rupert calms her down and brings her back. Father Christmas tricks Rupert into climbing down his own chimney with his present (though the plane ride to get there was rather exciting). Everything in the story is topsy turvy, with the imagined real and the real imagined, so we have to expect the unexpected. The doll is given to Rupert's human friend Sylvia: she pretends to be a doll, but gives Rupert a wink. Sylvia thinks she is only a doll, but she is wrong. By the end of 1942, a child's imagined world has become an important coping mechanism to counter the grotesque real world.

By 1943, the threat of invasion was gone as Hitler's invasion of Russia had seriously weakened his army. Buzz bombs were the new fear. The strips mention a few adventures with aeroplanes, and a submarine but are generally less anxious. The most tense was *Rupert and the Reindeer*, strange as Christmas was normally protected by 'nice' stories. Over the usual happy proceedings, a dark mist falls, Santa's sleigh crashes, Rupert gets entangled in the broken reins and stranded, and for the rest of the strip they all, Santa included, try to put right the mess. They succeed, labelling up the parcels, and Santa goes off bareback. Then Rupert cannot get home to Nutwood. Not quite a prisoner of war, he is a prisoner anyway, so the story plots the great escape. The magic dust is locked away, but the soldiers on guard are sympathetic. The balloons leak and the escape is made, as from Colditz, by a glider powered by two rockets. It gets them home safely, but explodes on impact, a very graphic colour picture. It is in the end a happy Christmas, but with many challenges and dark and sombre undertones. The submarine comes in *Rupert's Winter Journey* where an inventor tests his submarine on a long journey with Rupert, Bill Badger and Sailor Sam. The u-boat war was a source of anxiety throughout the war. This submarine not only succeeds but also rescues an old comrade of Sailor Sam – it could be a source of salvation after all. In other stories, greedy men are defeated, and the (fifth column?) fox brothers are defeated by Jock the Scottie dog. The most fun however is encountered in *Rupert and the Fairy Cycle* which takes Rupert up trees, over clouds and to distant lands, all before tea. It converts into a monoplane as it powers through the sky, for fun and not for bloodthirsty or dangerous ends. It is a sign that the new breed of planes, the Thunderbolts or Mosquitoes for example (but not quite yet jets), are fleetier and more magical than ever before.



A year later, the Christmas strip still finds Rupert and Bill Badger restrained in Santa's castle by heavy security, but they are able to get home on a magic paper dart, with the assistance of the military. Life is still not free, and it takes a little imagination to steer through it. In 1944 also we see the introduction of jet and rocket power. In *Rupert and the Rocket Plane*, the boffin professor invents a rocket plane, which has a rocket nozzle at the back, which takes off upright like a rocket. Rupert gets to ride in it. It has a few technical troubles, and parachutes down to earth, where it and Rupert have to dodge some smugglers before it can be retrieved. The rocket is triumphant, ushering in a new future; the wicked men, symbolising the Nazis and all opponents to good order, are arrested and "get what they deserve". In general, the 1944 strips (1946 Annual) are more playful and relaxed, encouraging adventure but warning of dangers to be avoided.

The 1947 Annual carried strips from 1945, and some especially written stories. There is an experimental plane (which crashed) but only one story, a newspaper strip, deserves discussion in this context. This is *Rupert and Koko*, 1<sup>st</sup> Oct 1945 to 24<sup>th</sup> November, the first story to post-date the ending of both arenas of war. The plot is that a pilot arrives by plane to consult the Professor (who symbolises advanced technology) and brings with him a small black boy (symbolising the third world). The pictures stereotype him as jet black with bright red lips, with three sticking up pillars of hair ('spikey ringlets'), and wearing a kaftan cloak. We recognise him from Epaminondas, Sambo and the negro minstrels. The boy escapes to play with Rupert, which they do very nicely, although the boy is 'lively'. However, the pilot has to leave urgently and the boy was missing. So the boy, now named Koko from his un-English patter, stays with Rupert until the pilot returns. Rupert's family are thanked for their kind hospitality. The boy is described as a 'coon' from 'Coon Island'. So begins huge controversy which has resulted in there being no facsimile Annual published where it has a coon story. This is a pity, for reasons I explore here. 'Coon' was an unpleasant term of racist abuse in America, short for raccoon, but in Britain it was an innocent reference, as were the 'nigger minstrels'. No offence was intended then, though this would soon change.

My commentary is this. The defeat of Japan in August 1945 brought the world back to British control. This included islands of black people who, in the eyes of Britons like Alfred Bestall, needed British protection. The black boy is thus protected by the airman, and by Rupert's family. It is a solemn British responsibility. Coon Island was described more fully in a new story in the 1946 Annual, so post-dating Koko. Rupert's relationship with Koko is excellent; third world relationships with Britain, via the pilot, are thus positive. The 1946 Annual contains the story, *Rupert on Coon Island*. Rupert is marooned on an island when a gorgeous black girl meets him and is delighted to see him. They go hand in hand and meet other Coons who "seem determined to show how friendly they are", even though he can't understand them. They give him food and flowers. Rupert does not behave well. He makes them anxious by climbing trees, and when they provide for all his needs, he tries to escape. He is 'rescued' from the island by Sailor Sam and his chums, but as he leaves, the Coons have been badly let down and are in hiding. He hopes against hope that he will meet them again. The British had been welcomed by many aboriginal peoples, but had filled them with fear and failed to bother to understand them. Rupert is positive, hopeful for a future relationship. They are beautiful people, if a little 'off' and 'queer'. Britain had not really had time to come to terms with "the other", but this was a positive start. Bestall here emphasises that white

imperialists (actually invaders) are at fault. This therefore is a thoroughly anti-racist story.

### **Gypsy Granny and The Cuban Crisis.**

The 1944 Annual has Rupert meet his friend the 'gypsy boy' Rollo. This was to be a very positive relationship over the coming years, and introduces us to Gypsy Granny, a wise woman, a woman to be consulted. In October 1962, the world experienced a crisis over Russian armaments being placed in Cuba close to the American coast. The world held its breath that nuclear war might be averted. We (I was 14) went to bed half expecting not to wake up next morning. A Gypsy Granny story resulted from this experience, *Rupert and the Rivals*, 26.10.1963 – 24.12.1963. Here, a rival magician arrives to fight our friendly Chinese conjurer, up to now the more powerful magician in the world (Khrushchev versus Kennedy). The rival is angry, grumpy. The world holds its breath, as people go dizzy with the effects of the magic. Gypsy Granny explains what is going on, but cannot change anything. She, an old woman, represents superior adult wisdom. The solution comes from Rupert himself (representing the young). He picks up a magic mirror that the hostile conjurer has dropped (representing pride, arrogance, self-centredness?) just as he waves his wand and says 'Begone'. Rupert and Bill Badger are whisked to a desert island with palm trees and black children (Cuba? rather like Coon Island of the 1940s) but has the magic mirror, the hostile conjurer's main weapon (his hostile attitude) that terrifies everyone. Meanwhile, back in Rupert's home world the magicians have become friends, getting on like a house on fire, allies now, because attitudes are changed. Therefore the (nuclear) threat has been removed. The significance of the threat being a mirror lies in hostile powers reflecting the power of the good conjurer – that is, balance of power and nuclear proliferation. The alternative outcome offered, of superpower friendship, removes the arms race. Gypsy Granny (the old) cannot resolve the problem but says that Rupert (the young) has been where she cannot go. The young can imagine and dare solutions which are beyond war-weary adults, however wise. The world's future depends on this.

This optimism, delivered in the newspaper for Christmas 1963, was not yet to bear fruit in Bestall's real world so he preferred the story to be suppressed. It is interesting that this story did not appear in an annual at the time. We may guess why, as very few live stories were omitted from annuals. It finally made it in 1978 by which time the Russian threat had diminished. Also Alfred Bestall was no longer in charge. John Harrold was just taking over and the editors had to scrape up any previously unpublished material to fill the void. Old Bestall strips were even repeated in the Daily Express, when no new copy was available, often using only half the pictures to fill gaps disjointedly. When Bestall influenced what would be in or out of the annuals, he kept *Rupert and the Rivals* out. This is a pity, since the annual rather than the newspaper would have made this remarkable pacifist story more widely available to children.

Sources: *The New Rupert Index*, by WOG Lofts and DJ Adley, revised by John Beck. Rupert Annuals, 1941, 1942, 1943, 1944, 1945, 1946, 1947, 1978.